

# Workers Struggles: Asia, Australia and the Pacific

16 February 2002

## **Indonesian furniture workers strike for better pay and allowances**

Over 300 workers employed by the furniture manufacturing company PT Leang Yang, in the Central Sulawesi capital of Pulu, struck on February 9 for higher wages and better working conditions.

The workers claim that when the government set the minimum wage, the company ignored seniority and adjusted all wages to the minimum of 350,000 rupiah per month (\$US29). One worker claimed that his wage should have increased from 280,000 to 395,000 rupiah, but the company stopped paying a meal and travelling allowance.

## **State rail workers threaten strike in Indonesia**

Workers at the state-owned railway PT Kereta Api Indonesia (KAI) will launch a week of strikes from February 17 if the company's newly-appointed board of directors does not immediately step down. Four of the six directors are linked to the previous board, which was forced to resign due to mismanagement and a series of fatal train accidents.

Workers plan to bring freight and passenger services to a standstill on Indonesia's main islands of Java and Sumatra if their demands are not met.

## **Thousands protest in Pakistan**

Thousands of workers rallied in Hyderabad on February 13 to protest against mass sackings and the violation of labour laws by employers. The rally was organised by the All Pakistan Trade Unions Organisation.

Textile workers and sugar mill workers were present in large numbers. More than 10,000 textile workers have been laid-off and at least 20 factories closed down in one Hyderabad industrial park. Workers carried banners and placards accusing employers of using unemployment to drive down wages and conditions. Sugar mill workers are now being hired as day

labourers and stripped of holidays and bonuses.

The rally also raised the plight of 350 workers who were sacked from the Pearl Continental Hotel in Karachi for going on strike. Speakers demanded their immediate reinstatement.

## **Indian public sector workers continue strike action**

Public sector workers in the southern Indian state of Kerala are continuing their nine-day strike. The action has closed government offices and schools since February 7. The workers have exempted essential services, such as hospitals, electricity generation and water supplies.

The strike was triggered by cuts in workers' pay and conditions, as part of an austerity budget imposed by the state government. The government has refused all negotiations with public sector unions, invoked the Essential Services Maintenance Act (ESMA) and begun recruiting strike-breakers. At least 12 public servants have been arrested and more than 60 charged for violations of ESMA.

## **Bangladesh transport workers strike against new laws**

Transport workers struck across Bangladesh on February 11 against government legislation banning vehicles older than 20 years being used on major roads. The law will force many owner-operators out of business or to take out large loans to purchase new vehicles. The drivers held protests in a number of cities.

## **Walkout at Australian oil refinery**

Some 125 contract maintenance staff employed at the Caltex oil refinery in Sydney walked out on February 14 declaring that the facility was unsafe due to a gas leak. They returned to the work that night, after the site was cleared by the government industrial safety agency, WorkCover.

Tensions have been building between Caltex and the

contractors over a number of issues, ranging from safety, rostering arrangements and superannuation contributions.

### **Power workers strike over unsafe work practices**

Twenty-two mine maintenance workers employed at Victoria's Yallourn Energy power station walked off the job for a day last week after being directed to do electrical work by a foreman who was not a specialised electrician supervisor. The walkout comes only two months after union officials and management pushed through a new workplace agreement that cut jobs and introduced productivity speed-ups.

A Yallourn Energy spokesperson, Lindsay Ward, claimed that the mineworkers accepted the agreement which included a commitment to workplace reform. Dean Mighell, the Victorian Secretary of the Electrical Trade Union, lined up with management's abuse of safety standards. His response to the walkout was to advise the company to consult with workers to introduce the workplace changes.

### **Victorian rail unions make deal with Connex**

Rail unions and public transport company, Connex, have settled a dispute that provoked strikes and threats of further industrial action this month. Under an agreement reached in the industrial court on February 15, Connex will sack 10 staff as part of cost-cutting measures, rather than 71. In exchange for the reduced number of layoffs, the workforce will face a series of changes to their work practices and conditions.

### **New Zealand university staff prepare strikes**

Strikes at six of New Zealand's seven universities are looming as tertiary students return for the new academic year. Academic and general staff have been involved in protracted contract negotiations since last year, seeking pay rises of 8 percent for academics and 6 percent for support workers. The universities have offered rises of 1.8 percent, less than the rate of inflation.

Staff at Wellington's Victoria University have voted to strike in the second week of lectures if contract negotiations, scheduled for next week, fail. Industrial action at Otago University will disrupt student enrolments if union members reject an offer at a ratification meeting next week. At Massey University, the administration has withdrawn from talks after staff rejected a pay offer last month and voted for strike action.

A national strike will proceed on March 4 unless agreements with the universities are reached by then. So far, only Auckland University has settled its contract, providing a 4.5 percent increase over two years.



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